



Brian Dillon on Nina Katchadourian

I saw this piece at Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York, in December 2007. I knew a little of Nina Katchadourian's work already, but all I knew of this exhibition was that it had something to do with animals. It was a great show. When I met the artist a couple of days later, I only wanted to ask her about this one work.

At first glance, the order proposed by *The Continuum of Cute* seems straightforward, even self-evident: one hundred tiny photographs, each image a stage in the transition from a living thing that is ugly as sin (can it be a real creature, this object which is all mouth and busy feelers?) to the most beatific of animals (a bumbling little ball of white fur and curiosity). Before long, though, one starts to scan the middle of the grid—it has also been exhibited as a slim horizon on the gallery wall—for the essential photograph that must exist: the missing link (but how could there be a link at all?) between the pug-ugly and the winsome, the heart-warming and the skin-crawling. But the aesthetic fulcrum is not there, and not only because you cannot decide which is cuter, a hippo or a manatee. The central uncertainty spreads in both directions, and pretty soon warty toads and wattled fowl start to look oddly endearing, koalas and kittens unaccountably grotesque.

The cute—subject of Katchadourian's elegantly unnerving (though not definitive) arrangement of animal portraits found on the internet—is among the most ambiguous and least analyzed of aesthetic categories. Etymologically, it is unexpectedly sharp and knowing: the word is derived from “acute” and still retains something of its sense of smartness or sass. Don't get cute, we say. At the same time, it functions as a less overt, somewhat disengaged, designator for sexual attractiveness: Sure, we shrug, (s)he's cute. . . . But cute is mostly a sort of beauty softened by innocence—albeit an innocence that we sometimes suspect is feigned—and a helplessness that borders on the annoyingly ingratiating. We're hooked by the cute, but we know it's a game: an infantilized (for us as much as the object) or debilitated version of proper aesthetic experience. Then again, it unsettles apparently more stable categories. What, for instance, is the opposite of the cute? Is it the ugly, the disgusting, the creepy, the abject, the horrible? Or the austere, the reserved, the haughty, even perhaps the elegant?

A narrative of sorts keeps folding back on itself. Big eyes are cute, but not those insectal orbs; floppy ears must be cute, except when they turn semitransparent; furriness is certainly cute (the last fifteen examples are all mammals), but doesn't that hairless guinea pig have a certain babyish charm? Is anthropomorphism cute? Not when it manifests as an eerie blob with a bulbous nose and dismal expression. Much of Katchadourian's varied work explores this limit zone—as comical as it is fundamental—between the human and the animal. She has observed unlikely cross-species friendships, taught bird-song to United Nations translators, cross-dressed a mouse and a snake in (rather cute) costumes, worn a mustache made of twin caterpillars. With *The Continuum of Cute*, she shows our aesthetic, emotional, and biological distance from the animal world in which we persist in seeing images of ourselves. It's the squirrel that gets me, with his tilted head, brushy ears, and clasped paws: he is *sickeningly* cute.

Brian Dillon is the UK editor of *Cabinet* magazine and the author of a memoir, *In the Dark Room* (Penguin, 2005). He is working on *Tormented Hope: Nine Hypochondriac Lives*, to be published in 2009. His writing appears regularly in *frieze*, *Art Review*, *Modern Painters*, *The London Review of Books*, *Sight & Sound*, and *The Wire*. He lives in Canterbury, England.

Nina Katchadourian, *The Continuum of Cute* [dimensions variable], 2007. Courtesy the artist and Sara Meltzer Gallery